

# *Four* | | | | | |---|---|---|---| | ● | ◐ | ◯ | ◯ | |---|---|---|---| *Quarters*


*Thomas Snapp: Poet's Portfolio*

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# Four Quarters

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Cover drawing by *James Hanes*

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## Marginalia . . .

*"Who did the great drawing of deGaulle on the cover of the last issue?" people have been asking. Each time we point to the single line on the title page which reads, "Cover drawing by James Hanes," our embarrassment is more acute. That single line of type is hardly sufficient acknowledgement of Art Editor Jim Hanes's contribution to the new look Four Quarters has had this year. So here's a few lines in praise of an artist who has already had a great deal of praise from more respectable quarters and would just as soon have us pay him a fat fee instead. He knows we're not about to spoil him now, and he will have to settle for a laurel wreath or two, that being the only thing left in the budget.*

*Walking through Hanes's most recent one-man show, we were struck by the variety of styles exhibited in the drawings and paintings hanging there. The one variation missing was abstractionism. Hanes is determinedly representational: his love of the human figure and the faces of his subjects permeates each work. Whether he is depicting the septuagenarian deGaulle from an old photograph in Life Magazine, or painting one of his children from life, Hanes brings to his work the sensitivity of line of a master draftsman; he has little time for painters "who can't even draw."*

*He himself began drawing when he was old enough to hold a pencil, and he learned his craft in years of study at Biarritz, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation, and as a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome. He will return to Italy this summer for a show of his work.*

*His contributions to this magazine have not been mere illustrations but works of art in themselves and we appreciate them. We know from many generous comments that our readers do too.*

*—J. J. K.*

# Thomas Snapp

## A Portfolio



*A steady storm of correspondence!  
A night flowing with birds, a ragged  
moon,  
And in broad day the midnight come  
again!  
A man goes far to find out what he is—  
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
All natural shapes blazing unnatural  
light.*

—Theodore Roethke.

We all live in Roethke's dark time, and his moon, ragged with storm, traces a persistent theme of our best poets: the analogies of the self in its shifting senses, lost beyond time to invisible sights of song and light. That far field in which he raged was at first just behind his father's greenhouse, and it opened onto a wooded life and a flowered career, onto anxieties come too soon and honors come too late, and onto a final vision which returned to watch with wash'd eyes that same transformed field in Saginaw, except that

The field is no longer simple:  
It's a soul's crossing time.

But in 1940, Roethke had this ahead, had left Saginaw, just as a new poet was born there—a poet he would never know, but whom many, fortunately, will: Thomas Snapp. The son of a Russian immigrant and a displaced cowboy, who would take his small son outside, "soft with moon," and recite poetry to him for hours, Snapp was sent to "technical school" and later to several years of work, unskilled and skilled, at General Motors, America's industrial gut—an experience which frightened and perplexed him, and from which he shyly escaped to the University of Michigan. It was there, at a reading given

by poet-teacher Donald Hall, that he first thought seriously of writing poems himself—if only as a defense against Detroit. He began to study with and write for Hall, an enthusiastic, perceptive, accomplished master, and went on to win five awards as an undergraduate—including two Hopwoods and one from the Academy of American Poets—and soon after a grant to become poet-in-residence at Phillips Exeter Academy, from which he moved in 1970 to teach and write on Long Island where he now lives, stalking his past and his place for poems.

Those he has found and formed are striking, but not in any fashionable sense of the term. There are no corrosive confessions, no abrasive gloom, no grim catalogue of the spirit's atrocities. Snapp's poems are neither thematically austere nor technically ingenious, but rather deeply felt meditations on the passages of time, through which we lapse toward death, as though rewinding a film in unsequenced reels. The immanence of time, that most visible scar of mortality, has been Snapp's central experience and theme since his earliest work—as, for example, in his conclusion to "Life Warp":

. . . see yourself: a stick figure  
left beneath the arc (  
someone once marked)  
on a blackboard  
to illustrate: how a pitched curve

in time or an experience  
of great gravity might  
warp a straightforward  
fast-moving man toward  
a gross existence  
or deflect you thru space to let

you push thru a thousand doors  
opened away from home and yet  
turn and return  
as young (or  
younger)  
than when you set out

This same profound sense of change—felt sharply in the death of a father or the life in a son—is essential as well to Snapp's understanding of poetry itself: "For me, poetry is a way to move away from one self, time, and place; a way to travel great distances, look, and come back—*changed*. For me, poetry is a freedom, a way of being graceful." But that great distance travelled is, ultimately, an inner journey toward an autonomous, poetic self—a "secret sharer"—which observes and reacts in



ways less real but more true. "Speaking for myself," says Snapp, "my poetic self is characterized by a kind of vulnerability, a helplessness. When involved in significant experience, it almost always reacts with awe and inventiveness. It wants to survive the practical side, theories and schools, wives and production lines, laundromats and lectures."

The small ways we survive—these are what he chronicles. And it seems appropriate, almost inevitable, for the poems to be structured narratively—strongly plotted in specific experience, often remembered, always dramatic. And his short lines of hesitant grace counterpoint the dark secrets they whisper, the ominous mysteries in which every story originates and to which each returns, injured by discovery. A recent poem, "July and the Boat," illustrates this well:

July  
and the boat  
ninety feet from shore—  
we dove and came up splashing  
August  
around us. When we could stand,  
September  
trembled, was still, and ran down our backs  
with the river; as we climbed the high banks,  
October  
clung until we dried and kissed,  
then slid away with our footprints.  
November  
crumbled in color under us  
as we rolled. When we stood apart at the top, small  
lines formed around your eyes  
and under my fingers your skin turned rough—  
December  
strung the sky with bells, clouds, and the smell  
of snow. When we looked out, the moon was  
fat over the river and, half a year below,  
summer  
drifted bow-down, darkened amber—  
so we ran, sliding and falling, to  
shore and dove with momentum enough  
to come up close, and climb into  
the boat and  
July.

Snapp's is a sensuous, expansive journey, and its narrative can sustain various readings, equally probing and enriching. One has his lovers, beached, making their love, tearing their pleasure through the iron gates

of seasons and sex, and tumbling, exhausted, exultant, back into the time of their lives. Another view watches them climbing banked states of feeling and time, experiencing an eerie compression of their relationship, so that the speaker feels he has seen their future, his lover (and by implication, of course, himself) aging rapidly, almost violently. They return to their boat, as does the poem and its reader, "*changed*." This and all of Snapp's poems make one suspect that the prayer with which he may finally kneel is also Roethke's:

Make me, O Lord, a last, a simple thing  
Time cannot overwhelm.

As is clear in "July and the Boat," form, for Snapp, means a structure which conforms to the ideas, actions and images of the particular poetic experience and informs them all. Each of his poems evolves its own form "from the various parts and functions of the poem, and serves them (and it) rather than being imposed on them." Further, he maintains that individual poems, rather than their poets, have influenced his craft—and this is, no doubt, more true of most writers than the more familiar theories of assimilative imitation. Still, those poems—by Roethke, Jarrell, Lowell, and Dickey (whose presence seems prominent)—gather into our major modern tradition. And though the vision and voice of each of these poets may vary, their work shares an emotional sincerity, an intellectual clarity, a lyrical integrity and unsurpassed technique, which any young poet must envy and aspire to.

And yet Snapp's work is distinctive; he is a poet of extraordinary talent and great promise. His style is certain, his perspectives superbly submerged in the personalities of his speakers—especially those of the child and the lover: those two spots of time when one is most human if only because he seems least so. While dramatizing how we "fray into the future," he urges the passionate survivals of art and love. In fact, his images stay, the way loves linger: enduring, sufficient, insistent. The poems which follow here—read them closely, quietly—show us the shapes we see, tell us the words we say, give us the lives we lose.

—J. D. McClatchy

### The Playhouse

in the forest has grown  
so small

I can't go in  
Kneeling in the chimney shade  
when the sunlight chinks  
the wood



I enter as dust  
motes dance like pins  
in the musical light

The wrinkled face of the stove  
rusts and smiles  
like my father's  
fixed to the wall: too slow  
for the eye

Fish poles in the rafters  
warp toward water  
I think  
the wind whistling in the flue  
will cry like a woman  
or a baby  
before dark

The bones of darkness creak  
it shakes its heads  
and folds its hands  
over the rotting cabin  
where he once tried to live  
with my mother and me

### **In His Season**

His best shotgun rusts in my hands.  
His best dog's chilled and winded,  
yet I've only trailed him halfway  
through this month of rain.

I follow the dog as it hunts  
for a grouse and a lost man.

In the season of hunts and ruts,  
rank smells and colors,  
one death cannot change  
our original relations.

He hunts for my father in another  
time, but a younger

spoor distracts him. He points  
a mound of brush and fern,  
waits for an old man,  
and doesn't see me. He expects

me to come up to him and kick, like  
God, what is there to life.

then kill it clean.  
Slow death by rot and grief  
he can't understand or accept . . .  
The bird explodes into branches!

Dead leaves flutter and fall  
like dead sparrows.

Remembering my quick father's curses,  
I curse the bird, the gun,  
the weather.  
I've disappointed him again.

He snorts, shakes his head—  
clearing his scent of the loss,

he regards me with disgust,  
shoves his nose to earth  
and leaves for another,  
better season. I follow him,

hunting for my father in the leaves  
fallen in his season.

## MX Tower

*For K. H. & Will*

Those of us without gods, fathers,  
or playgrounds, could tell you:  
it was approximately  
two-hundred-ten crossties  
from Stone Street crossing  
to the railroad bridge,  
and four hundred more to MX Tower.

We could also tell you how a man  
from another country  
bent nights over a Bible  
in a wooden obelisk;  
he sat near a telegraph key  
and the bank of huge levers  
he worked back and forth until dawn.

He gave us his time  
and Old Country advice  
as impossible to understand  
as the tictactic of the wireless  
chattering about trains  
coming from all directions—  
but we could feel them

grating over mountains and rivers,  
grinding through wheatland, cornland,  
and northern forest. When he looked  
at his watch and pointed to lever 6,  
we ran for it, asking: Is it  
the bridge?—not waiting for  
what we knew was the answer.

One squeezed the grip-lock, and two  
of us pulled hard, feeling, as we moved,  
huge rails move slightly  
as somewhere a train  
did not plunge into water, but ran safe  
under us to Detroit.  
Late one night

he was trying to explain  
something from Job  
when we asked: Could we work the wireless?  
In our left palms  
he inked our names in code,  
and watched us as we sat down  
to tap what we held

for all the towers and depots  
of a darkened country. Afterward,  
we listened for a reply,  
but none came.

"How will they answer  
your names?" he asked. Last night,  
tramping between streetlights

in a dark neighborhood,  
I saw a light glint,  
switching rails; a semaphore  
raised its arm, as somewhere  
a lever was pulled.—  
I stopped to salute,  
with my left hand, a dead

friend and that signalman  
who could teach us  
nothing of earthly use, yet  
let us  
telegraph into the night  
our unknown  
and unanswerable names.

## The City

For three nights the Wizard of Oz  
the Witches and Dorothy  
played in our neighborhood—  
all was possible then  
four mornings we woke  
to the clink of tin  
feet on golden brick  
We ran to our sidewalk  
only to see it  
brown underfoot  
and empty The fifth we stared  
at the horizon: halfway  
there a thousand refrigerators

gathered in a field of grass  
By noon of that low time  
their modest elevation  
possessed us—

We ran to claim  
them: AMANA & GIBSON  
FRIGIDAIRE & KENMORE  
KENMORE & KELVINATOR  
NORGE & WESTINGHOUSE  
became our home  
addresses  
when we played and hid from  
the Wicked Witch of the West

We were happy as spun glass  
spun into our skins  
and nights we rolled  
through a wide field  
of fragrant poppies  
that tried to put  
us to sleep but  
we only rested  
and remarked: The sun's  
halfway high  
and over the road  
that runs  
between spellbound cities

Jack Sims spoiled it when  
he entered a deepfreeze—  
nobody heard him call  
the Witch by his sister's name  
and the games went on  
After dark his father came  
calling for him Calling  
we ransacked the moonlight  
enameled city until  
we found him resting  
among poison flowers  
nodding at the midnight  
warmth of an invisible sun

## A Private Leaving—

a house in Cholon,  
you hastily advance  
into retreating dark,  
remember your rank,  
and zip your fly.

Seeing armies of doves  
taking the city,  
you think: all night  
in the rubble of high places  
they've waited for this  
breaking, this calm.

Weary, numb and unafraid,  
the doves feeding on the road  
don't fly until you kick  
at them and trip  
the buried mine  
Sickened with them

you bury your mind  
in the smell of burning deadwood  
while mama rocks with the Word  
burning as papa speaks  
from the stove with a voice  
like the Bible: There may be

women named like almond  
on the tongue  
and an unpronounceable enemy  
between your legs between  
where you tread among  
those blasted doves

and where your camp may be seen  
breaking into light  
and retreating  
as you approach  
the vanishing point.



## Her Winter Letter

- I. Bagless, and denying Christmas  
brought you home, you  
stepped from a grimy train  
with my gift: your promise  
to stay. Crossing the river  
I saw what once was  
pure moonlight and water  
froth with waste between  
gray banks of snow.

All the way home you talked,  
I listened—but your smug  
words on the market and  
love seemed impossible as smog  
loitered in the street  
and cupped each light  
as if it were a diamond

or a match. I couldn't explain  
how I worried about  
the single time (between  
*Incoming* and *Filing Out*)  
when my mail basket loomed  
up like a wire fence  
between me and my life.

When I thought I saw  
a huge typewriter  
crouching on the roof,  
I ran from my sterile office . . .  
Wading near the dropoff  
in the muddy reservoir  
that holds my babies,

I watched them surface,  
*staring*—as though  
they were hungry for me,  
a mother or—nothing. I woke  
up, walked home, bathed,  
and went back to my office:  
forty,  
and dressed for dull work  
in bright yellow.

II. Now I dream a dark train  
hisses at a stop  
Its coach doors  
open  
and a single step  
is put down  
by two conductors  
who whistle coldly and grin  
as if they meant to insult  
or encourage me:  
*Wait awhile*

When you appear ready  
to step down—  
the doors clang shut  
and the train starts by  
framing us in  
one window—  
then a long strip of still  
positive faces  
are all mine all now  
fading

Waking  
once more I tell  
myself: There was no train  
only an early movie  
scene after dinner wine  
and solitude  
with the dubbing voices  
of the wind  
worrying  
the wintering trees  
and more empty places

## Splashdown

Walking in a fog near Helicon,  
I saw an old craftsman  
trying to restore  
a picture that hung on  
the other side of the air.

He brushed mist from a landscape  
of white marble, olive trees,  
blue water and sky;  
a red sun  
opened like an iris  
bleaching tunics of men,  
and the city  
raised under them shone  
like the time it was  
beneath the god's outcrop.

Over his shoulder I saw Death  
put in His place:  
high up in the pediment with  
the gods, but reclining  
at one shadowy extreme, His  
pock-marked face  
twisted away—  
Suddenly,  
the men threw up their arms  
to cheer a boy  
tumbling  
out of the sky.

When he disappeared  
into the deepest blue,  
I looked for some sign  
of suffering or unsuccess:  
no sorrow, no fear,  
not even a dull plow-  
man or indifferent ship  
appeared to distract—then,  
it occurred  
to me: *the old man was  
gone . . .* But just before  
the mist closed in,  
I saw the boy bob up  
like Apollo,  
crawl to the edge  
of the original liquid  
net,  
then climb out;  
pale, shaking, half-dead,  
but on his own  
and able to manage  
a slight bow.

## Vantage Point

On Cadillac Mountain  
I sit high above Bar Harbor  
at the summit  
of cracked granite  
keeping Frenchman Bay  
with a yacht racing—  
slow as my blood—  
from the tiny cove  
where a wizened man  
claws a dripping lobster pot.  
The trapped sea runs away—  
quick as my life—  
leaving nothing to show for  
these hours of dreaming  
and waiting.

Knowing that to move  
even one foot could blot  
one of us out,  
to keep my distance,  
these separations—  
I close my eyes. Trying to fix  
this image of them: small, sustained,  
waning with the sun—  
I imagine another summer  
where everyone lives, picnics  
at the shore, at love . . .  
The people I've lost somewhere!  
Before the great stone thrusts  
me higher, I turn. Half blind  
with the landward sun  
I climb down.

# Serendipity

• Harris Downey

For most of our actions, calculated or rash, we can readily find a reason; however, I doubt whether we half the times know why we do this or that, rarely feeling compelled to seek the source of our reason.

Mere existence is such a succession of decisions, even in sleep, that, without our unquestioned ways, we would all soon be mad. Custom is an abacus giving quick answers; else, to know the why of any action would be a search for rocks and shells shaped just-so for a plausible pattern—your very bones lying at last in the sun among a stone calligraphy, undecipherable and strange. Yet, unless we be both curious and courageous, we become creatures of the customs that we create.

In every hour of the day one makes a score of decisions according to the way of the world, then goes whistling a tune that any other knows and, elated by recognition, acclaims or, at least, idly accepts.

But now and then, even to the most cautious of us, comes a choice so ostensible of justice and of possible regret that the code of the hour becomes a straw that any donkey might fling to the wind. Hand and heel, we must scratch the hills and the beaches for a token that custom covered deep with its copious flow.

God! Do I halt before I've begun? Do I apostatize or digress?

This night, here on this desk, lies the notice of an inheritance which makes me rich and which I accept. Is it not rightfully mine if Mama, till her dying, meant it to be mine? I have tried not to wonder whether I deserve it; for it would take little wonder to make me cry *Never!*

I forsook them—my mother and my father, who loved me and whom I loved in return but not so much as I loved my escape from the folkway, its make-up and its quick change from what-you-are to what-you-must-seem. Stepping over a walking stick dropped to the rug, I had clutched the agate knob and pulled the door shut against their bent bodies and their perishing hopes.

No! This flower of language that I lean to is digression—and excuse. I must be forthright and plain; for I have no judgment to make, no conclusion to prepare for. You are my judge—whose judgments will be as varied as your complexions and the ways of your life, as varied as the questions that ever lie in my mind. Judge harshly if you must; only remember that I was, and am yet, at the mercy of pressures that the world bows to.

My intent is to recount a decisive act of my youth and the circumstances that provoked it. But first, I ought to explain this sudden and late urgency to explain. Its inspiration is this news of Mama's death and the questions that attend it: Why has she left all her goods to me, who was not of her flesh and who rejected her? Was her will made in love or vindictiveness? When did Papa die—why and how? How had they known of my whereabouts, known even my name? How and why had they followed me to the hour of their dying?

That's the prompting of this narrative which I begin and which, possibly, will lie unfinished and crumpled under this desk in the morning. Its sudden necessity, I am unsure of. I am fearful, perhaps, of some stupid hag or the instrument of some stupid law knocking on the door of one of my children, saying, "All of you are Negroes!"

Perhaps—and I hope it is so—I am forced to this narrative by contrition. Yet, I have ever been a dupe for the way of the world, have never had the courage, even when inspired, to cry out to the Emperor of Custom, "You are as naked as you were in your borning."

If, before your conception, the Omnipotence should ask, "And what color do you choose for your skin?"—you would surely hesitate among the shades, being innocent of birth and prejudice and priority. The yellow, sentient to light and satin-smooth, would haunt your wishes till death if you cast it aside. But what of the black so black that the sun shining upon it was consumed, all endlessly consumed, making the blackness more marvelously black and more beautiful still? How could one choose from all the shades, each with its beauty? Each, too, with its blemishes—since such pattern would be for the world, where perfection, being needless of desires, would be static and intolerable.

But in this world, which is our only reality, there are a few who, seeking, find the chance to name the color of their skin—all those in Chicago, Detroit, Zurich, and Paris who cross the barriers of color. So it was in Carthage, Damasco, Trinacria, and in some forgotten city of Egypt where in her profligacy, the last Cleopatra, intellectual rather than imperial, had lovers as various as her tongues. The fool who would trace blood might as well graph the sensuality, the boredom, the affability, and the idle curiosity of man.

It's remorse that makes me diverge. I was one of the rare ones free to choose his color. Confronted with the choice, I chose quickly. And surely, I chose right. But my manner was that of an ingrate; it was vindictive and cruel.

In defense of my behavior I might plead that I was shocked at the revelation of my identity, which was entirely opposed to the child I had been and to the man that I was. All experience became false; and all memories, alien. I was naked of years, of birthright, of any name even. All my resentments and hatreds, my adjustments and fidelities, had been lies.



Every hour of my life, except the idle hours of fancy, had been masquerade.

I might also plead my youth and the fear of facing a tottering world with little more than a college diploma. In the Mardi Gras of my life until then, I might find a thousand excuses for my turning away from the suppliant eyes of those I had known as my parents. But, for all the silent years afterwards, I can find no excuse. My only plea is that I yet remember the pain in their eyes and the pain in my heart as I walked away, closing the door, firm and final, behind me. The moon was bright that night in the yard. Flower smells hung in the air. From the river behind the house and beyond the high levee, a ship sounded its moan for safe passage. I walked past the japonica trees of the low yard and up the slate steps to the iron gate and the stone banquette.

*Stone iron, slate!* What is this compulsion to qualify each recognition? Was I never to see a thing in its purity: *steps, gate, banquette*? Do I even yet have to modify whatever I acknowledge? Possibly there's a dark meaning in the habit; but, for the hour, let us pass it by. There is yet many a silent afternoon to ponder the effects of a decision that was automatic and final.

My hair is jet, my eyes are violet, my skin is fair. My speech, in childhood and youth, was so deep-South that any Negro inflection would have been part and parcel of my voice even if my hair had been yellow.

There is a miscegenation in the speech of home more nearly consummate and more subtle than that in the complexions of the Negro—having risen, not from a vagrant urge, but from an interdependence of two people needing confidence one from the other, both seeking understanding and endurance—their loyalties to each other as stubborn as their hatreds of each other, the ways of their harmony so intricate as to leave hate indistinguishable from love. Hunger, of any sort, makes us all one. As fear does! As the cry of any child does, no matter its skin or the habit of its hair!

In the bank, on many a corner of streets, in the sawdust of the mercantile store, I had been stopped, tousled, and made-over all the years of my childhood. I must have been a handsome child whose looks alone prompted attention. But the white hand at my chin and the gentle question above my head *Whose wonderful young fellow are you?* only made me go stupid and still as Mama, passing my hand, said, "Answer the lady."

Can it be that, at such times, when I was in rompers or Fauntleroy attire, I looked down at the gutter, clenching my teeth, lest, looking up to a smile around dentures and to the dazzling noon above, I might cry: "I am Jeff-Jack Lemoine. And this is my mother, not my maid!" Could I have possibly been so knowing, or do I embellish my memories with afternoon fancies? Regret is confused with excuse and defiance. The gestures I might have made, the words I might have said—which of them were thought later and only wished to have been?

Memory is deceptive. If I invent, it is not to deceive but to seek the truth of what was. . . . Oh, the trivial memories are as lucid as their hour. I can hear Mama's taunt *Has the cat got your tongue?*, can feel her hand squeezing my own in an impatience of insolence and pride.

Once, at such a question, I stood stubborn and mute, holding my gaze to the banquette (or was it to the tile of a confectioner's) and there saw a penny, lost but for my gaze and precious for being found, yet more precious still for being left where it lay—Mama's impatient hand clutching my shoulder and her voice above me saying, "Come along now."

I recall that penny and, as clearly, recall the stubbornness that made me find it, then surrender it. Perhaps, through the years, it has become a symbol of a desire or a fear—perhaps a symbol of myself, abandoned and then found. One remembers best the trivial, the inconsequential, which, through the force and malleableness of memory, becomes significant.

The intrinsic penny I can recall in its first discovery; for its recollection, ever since, has been as much a practice as the C-scale at the piano, has been a continued returning to a beginning. Occasionally, I find the penny all anew in a dream. But in recollection or nightmare, I lose it, always choose to let it lie for other fingers to snatch, even though I regret the surrender: *That might have been mine!*

Confession is difficult when the act to be confessed, having been prompted by selfishness, hasn't even the excuse of ignorance or fear—all its subsequence as hollow as vanity.

Mama was fair; she might have passed for white in any strange place. Papa, according to the distinctions in our town, was *high-yellow*. But I was so fair (my lips were a bow, my nose was aquiline and fine) that, at a knowledgeable age, I imagined the man who gave me conception was a tall, important, gold-haired man adjusting his trousers as, sighing, he went under the japonica shadows, up the steps to the banquette and into the sun.

Time and again, when a boy, I did say in my mind *That's the one!*—seeing a straw-haired and fine-looking man riding a fine horse, else stopping his long motorcar at the curb or, perhaps, just crossing the street, his hand lifted in salutation, his voice resonant and sure, his teeth shining. *He's my father!* It never occurred to me then that such fancies rejected my father and dishonored my mother.

In our town—in any town I ever knew—to be a Negro was to hold your hat high and your head low. The *Sirs* and *Ma'ams*, the hypocritical laughter, the coming round the back way—these were small humiliations in a ritual which rose long ago from the white man's fear and from the Negro's skill for survival. All liturgies only—their final significance that of a long-suffered bondage and, as exactly, that of Jesus's submission.

Christianity is poor payment for one's freedom, for a restraint of choice and aspiration. But let me not say my say about Jesus or condemn

any man but myself. I have no right to the Negro's complaint: *Though I have prayed and waited this score of generations, I am waiting still, weary of praying and wearier still of aping the folklore that my country invented and fettered me in.* I haven't the right of such reproach, but I have its knowledge and know its bitterness, having been subject for half of my life to the taunts, the mockery, the condescending, and the mouth-honor that the Negro inherits.

It was a hot and moonbright night in a July that I escaped the onus of being a Negro—found myself free and, at last, clean! . . . Tell that not in this country, publish it not in the streets of my town!

No matter the shining floors I once played on or the odors round my childhood (sweet olive, magnolia, roses, and spices from the kitchen). no matter the fine linen in the mahogany bureaus and on my body, I felt clean for the first time when Mama said, "You were a foundling."

After my graduation from college, I had been home a long and idle summer when Papa, tapping my half-opened door, entered and said, "Come down to the parlor. There's something that Viola and I have to say."

I sensed nothing meaningful in his saying *Viola*. I doubt, even now, whether he had consciously chosen a name free of any loyalty, debt, or love. (His name for Mama was *Vi*. A *Viola* might have been a guest or a servant.) But I did hear a resignation in his words. Also, I saw that he carried his cane, which he walked round the yard with and through the streets with but never, till that time, leaned on in the halls of the house. His head was low, his back bent, as he went out the door.

I heard the cane tap the floor, then scrape the rails of the stair.

At first, I was concerned about him and the dejection I had heard in his voice and seen in his figure. The past year had been mean for the nation. In college, I had said good-bye to a score of fellows who knew me well enough and liked me enough to knock at my door, then explain their mid-year departure: *My folks too! It's all down the drain.* (Could I have heard a joy in their adversity?) I do remember that it was fashionable then to be penniless. Sudden poverty, it seemed, pointed out (even heightened, perhaps) the station one fell from and, so, made the most boorish fellow genteel. . . . Disaster levels us all to an equality.

But Papa's wealth was in land. No matter the catastrophe or the tulips rotting in their vases behind the locked doors of the bank, Papa's land endured—as indifferent to gilt-edged papers as to the litter upon it, the storms against it, or its needs flowering. Land waits—and not merely for a summer of shallots and tomatoes, but for all the dollars which fall like rain on rights-of-ways and sites for new ventures.

Papa's land (It was Mama's land really) ran from the bluff of Lafayette Street down through Penitence Street and beyond Natchez Street. Skipping the tracks of the railroad, it ran on to the levee, which, though

maintained by the nation, was its own. It stretched down the far slope to the pit-bars and the willows of the batture. It was industrial land whose value would ever increase even through seasons of high water or fox-glove or hard times.

Yet, as I slipped on my trousers, I fancied that land, too, had failed. Papa's land even! Perhaps it had never been his or Mama's at all; perhaps, someone, at last, with mandate or debenture, had come to reclaim it. From my first realization of our wealth, I had been doubtful of its validity; for, earlier still, I had come to think of Negroes as tethered to poverty.

I sought what money I had and put it in my pocket.

Surely it's the nature of any man yoked in discrimination to feel insecure—his livelihood, his roof, the plate on his table, the table itself and all his supper-dreams subject to any stranger's whim. And, as well, all the bric-a-brac of his life—his very memories. *This I will take. And this too; for I might fancy it later.*

In a vague reflection of such misadventure, I was anxious about Papa, wondering what I might say or do to reassure him. But as I turned at the top of the stair, a fear struck as vivid and as violent as lightning: Papa and Mama were impatient with my resignation to the shambles of the time. After the schools of my childhood, the college training of my manhood, I was only a clod come back to its place in a static terrain. All summer I had lolled about, aimless—walking round the yard between sleeping and eating. Else, lying abed naked to shorts in the heat, I had read the texts I once crammed and at last understood. The schemes I had busied—the intentions and dreams—all had been private. What could Papa and Mama have been mindful of except my foolish hunt of a doodlebug, my standing akimbo at the bank gate to watch the smoke of a train, my gluttony at meals, my naked legs crossing and uncrossing each other or maybe falling to the counterpane as, reading an old text, I encountered meanings, surprising and clear, that once had passed my hurried way—fatuous and vague.

I went down the stair slowly, seeking arguments the while for my summer's uncertainty.

"Come sit down," Papa said when I paused at the door. He was standing in the middle of the parlor. The cane that he leaned on was as unnecessary as the old shawl over his shoulders; for he was agile and strong, and the room was open to the heat of the evening.

In distress you seek comfort in habit, mindless of its fitness or season. Papa's shawl and cane were only props for a performance long rehearsed, Mama, as well, had practiced line, tone, and gesture. The embroidery in her lap was her *business* for the scene. A cue lost, a silence among us—she could thrust the needle into the cloth and hum *Go Tell Aunt Patsy* as she rocked to and fro.

But I was unprepared. Even improvisation was beyond reason; for the plot which unfolded was as fantastic as it had been, times before, in



my fancy. It was as if your idle thoughts, all your secrets and yearnings, had been recorded and were played back for you and the whole world to hear—all your naked conjectures that you would rather die than express.

I sat on a low stool near Mama's chair. We were silent and still. But memory leapt like a wild chord struck from the organ. After its violence I heard Mama, as in a time long ago, singing *The old grey goose is daid*: then, in the song's wheezing and fading, I heard my own thoughts like whispers: *Who is the goose, and whose is the loss?* After that, the silence of the room closed upon me. I might forever have been lost among the monsters of memory had Mama's voice not called me to the hour.

She said: "It's not easy to say what we have decided to say." Her voice broke before she finished the sentence, then tears wet the wrinkles of her long yellow face. "Maybe we have waited too long." Her words were forced through a paroxysm of coughs. Finding her handkerchief, she held it to her eyes. "Maybe we have been fools." Her voice, though plaintive and low, was a wail. But for the words she managed to utter, it might have been the cry of a thing slain in a wood. She threw the embroidery to the rug, blew her nose, wiped the tears from her face, then looked into my eyes. "We had always wanted a child," she said. "We prayed to Mary and bribed every saint in the calendar." And she looked away then, towards the organ and the Spanish shawl falling round it.

I knew that I had an advantage. They could never admonish me for any failure to find a way in the world. They were apologetic, even penitent for some failure of their own. I was relieved at the realization; yet, at once, I regretted whatever power it was that I held over them—a power which they knew but which I only sensed in their hesitant voices. The pity in their eyes (in their wrists going limp at mid-gesture, in their stammering and tears) was painful to me. I would rather have been the incorrigible child baking the howling tabby in the oven than the tall and healthy young man that I was.

That pity was our parting. Pity banishes loyalty and love. It wrings the heart—but in loathing, not despair. You pity the stray hound among her bowels splashed to the highway; with all the hate and regret of your negligence, or hers, (of all adversity, perhaps) you loathe her and her slow dying, loathe her eyes looking up into yours, loathe her helplessness and your own. Pity is rejection.

"We are not your natural parents," Papa said. He was leaning on the cane fixed at his heel—his back straight, his gaze lifted to the molding of the high wall. I realized that all their care of me—their guidance, scoldings, and approvals—had been in the authority of servants. I was the progeny of some strange, perhaps illicit but nonetheless magnificent affair—my father an elegant man on an elegant horse, and my mother—. No! I am too much ashamed to spell out the thoughts I had then.

I sat silent—thank God!—looking up to where Papa gazed. There were saucer-size webs all of a pattern and all equally spaced along the

molding below the ceiling. A mother spider had recently flipped the young from her back, each to a propitious place that she thought hers to give.

Papa said: "Remember when the circus used to come to town?" He pointed in the direction of the railroad by the levee. "Always early in the morning."

"We would get up before day," I said. "You would take me down to the corner to watch the elephants go by."

"And the horses."

"You used to tell me, *There go the lions, or maybe the tigers*. All the wagons would be boarded up then or covered with canvas. Then, later, there would be a parade."

"All the wagons would be open then—all white and gold for the parade, and gold mermaids on all their corners." Papa, though speaking to me, was still looking away. "There would be a leopard or a panther walking this way and back again behind his bars. Then the monkeys on their trapezes. Then a rhinoceros eating hay."

"And the cally-ope," Mama said.

Papa looked at me, saying, "And a band on top of a wagon playing marches." Then he looked away quickly. . . . Had he expected to see a boy on the footstool, sitting wide-eyed and eager?

"The cally-ope was always the loveliest part," Mama said. "Hearing it from out there in the distance, you would think that the *Robert E. Lee* had come out of the river and was paddling round all the boulevards."

Were Papa and Mama really lost in recollection or did they design? Papa had said *We're not your natural parents*: and I, seeking an adjustment to the startling intelligence, had pretended to ignore it. But suddenly I felt like a beast harried with whip and chair to an unnatural submission. "Stop it!" I cried. "Tell me right out what you are meaning to tell."

"I am only asking you to remember," Papa said. His body was confident as, still standing in the middle of the room, he leaned back on his cane. In the word *remember*, however, I had heard a hesitancy and a plea. His eyes were turned to the ceiling, but I knew they were tearful. I heard tears in his question: "Remember the quietness when the circus unloaded and came past the corner?"

"It used to seem like a dream or something seen in an unfamiliar mirror," I said. "Only the horses made any sound—their shoes on the cobbles . . . Or wagon wheels."

"When it went away in the middle of the night, it seemed quieter still."

"I would be asleep then."

"Yes, that's how it was," Mama said. She rocked in her chair, coming alive at our recollections which prompted her own. Her rocker assented: *That's how it was*.

Papa said: "This house, then, was the finest house along the route of the circus."



"And still is," Mama said. She had lifted the embroidery from the rug and was stroking it on her knee as she rocked to and fro, the old wicker whispering *So it was. So it is.*

Papa said: "One night, when the circus pulled out, it left you here on the gallery by the door."

Mama said: "It was Providence that got me up before day to turn on the light on the gallery and look out the front door for our old cat who had been missing for days. A blowing rain had come in. You might have died before we found you if I hadn't been restless about Tiber. I thought I heard him scratching on the screen to come in." The embroidery under her stroke was some old cat I had never seen. And the rocker whispered *It was so.*

"You were just a few hours old," Papa said.

"How can you know it was the circus that left me?"

Papa turned, then sat in a chair against the wall. He seemed resigned to the question and weary of the answer he would be obliged to give. "You were in lemon crate and wrapped up in an old robe." He put the tip of his stick to the rug and his chin to his hands clutching the crook of the stick. "The padding of the crate was a pair of old tights with holes at the knees."

"Dirty tights," Mama said, her rocker still but her head nodding to and fro. "I ought to have washed them and put them away to have them here now. But I burned them—and the crate and the robe."

A silence hung upon us in the tall room crowded with furniture, bric-a-brac, and story-telling pictures in gilt frames. But, outside, crickets called, a whistle screamed, and a bell rang above the roar and the shush of an engine.

"It was you that I heard," Mama said. "Not Tiber. We was never to see him again."

I was angry and resentful. I suppressed the impulse to scoff: *My heart bleeds that I wasn't your cat.* But, artless and confused, I made a crueler rebuke: "You raised me as your own when I was never nigger at all."

Neither Papa nor Mama was surprised by my censure. The word *nigger* was of no significance, but the tone I sang round it was alien, was of the white man's contempt. It is possible that they were prepared against any denunciation. But I was not prepared; the word, as I uttered it, was vile. Among ourselves we had used it habitually in referring to Negroes who did stupid or violent things or, in excuse of their irresponsibility, comforted themselves with the white man's conception of them. We had always thought of ourselves as *colored people*, of being shades free from the stricture of *nigger*. Dark Negroes had ever been skeptical of us, of our complexion and wealth—never accepting us as their own, and yet a bit reticent about acknowledging us any station above their own.

In certain moods we had ironically used the vile word in reference to ourselves. But in my rebuke the word and its censure was not among

ourselves; for suddenly, between my parents and me, stretched the age-old wilderness between white folk and black and all its obscure meanderings.

Mama rocked gently. Papa, leaning down from his chair, was tracing his cane along a design in the rug. The rug had been there for all my years. I had crawled on it, had learned to walk on it. Countless times, among toys, I had fallen to sleep on it. Yet, never till then, at the point of a stick, had I recognized its geometry of flowers.

Papa said: "There was a mark on your body." He was staring at the garland his stick commented on. "A mark more objectionable than kinky hair or pink skin growing dark."

"The word!" Mama said. "Tell him the word that's hateful even to niggers!"

I was distressed by the recrimination *even to niggers!* It was only an echo of my own hasty rejection; but, in her voice, it seemed far more unnatural and unfair.

Then her tone was her wonted tone, gentle and patient. "It might help him to understand why we felt it right to take him in as our own."

Papa, still leaning from his chair, drew his cane to the toe of his shoe and was mute. You might have heard a spider running over its web. Then the train sounded a tentative dong. We listened. There was the shush of the engine, then a buckling, then the full ring of the bell.

"What word?" I asked. "And what mark do you mean?"

The iron roar faded in the distance, the bell died. Frogs and crickets were noisy again. But, in the room, a silence settled back upon us. Mama threw the embroidery from her lap against the treadle of the organ. "Tell him, Joe Ben Lemoine, in the fine words that you know. Else I will tell him in my own nigger way."

"It wasn't important," Papa said. "But you had this mark—" He drew a long breath which, then, he exhaled around the accursed word: "hermaphroditic." He dropped his cane beside the chair. "That's why you were abandoned and why we felt free to take you in as our own."

"Was I such a freak as to be abandoned by freaks? Don't you know that I know my own body?" I was tall, smooth-bodied, and fine—fully conscious of the supple sway of my hips and confident of the appeal of my body.

"Of course you do. And so do we," Papa said. "But you were born—"

"Hermaphroditic." I was skeptical. I suspected them of some ruse to excuse their long silence of my parentage. "Why was there never any deformity even in my earliest memory?"

"There was a series of operations," Papa said.

"Without even a scar?"

"You outgrew the scars."

"Not those on his back and his side," Mama said. "On any cold day you can see them—or, at least, used to could."

Of course I knew the faint scars on my side and my back. And I could remember going ever so often to New Orleans on the train, just Mama and I. The coach had always been hot: the windows open, a dry wind blowing in—cinders in your hair, in your nose, in your eyes. I remembered the seats, upright and hard—their covering dirty and immemorably green, prickly to your touch and smelling of smoke. Of the last trip I remembered the taxi drive to the hospital, remembered a confusion about what door we should enter, remembered a nurse saying *This won't hurt at all* and a doctor saying, in a tone so compromising and sweet that it frightened me, *What a co-operative young man*. . . . Of course I have put words, even incidents, in my memories.

Highest Heaven, I was twelve then—or older! Yet I never asked *Why am I here?* or *What have you done?* I was always slow of wonder or doubt because I was secure then in the authority and the love of my parents.

But, now, curiosity clutched me. "Then tell me. What are these scars that I have?"

"Tell him, Joe Ben. Let him know what even a nigger, like you or me, would go crawl away and ever hide away for being."

"Viola!" Papa's cry was admonishment. He had probably been as bewildered as I at Mama's growing scorn. He had stared down at the rug as he cried her name. Then, as if in soliloquy, he said, "Please, Vi."

"Tell him!"

Caught in the violent change of my life-long fidelities and beliefs, of my identity even, I couldn't surmise what torture made her so suddenly vindictive and, as suddenly, a stranger. She had loved me all my life, jealously and well; yet, at that hour, she would have caught me as a thread and have embroidered me into a pattern of her vindictiveness. I was afraid of her and, fearing her, was free of her. All the years and the memories of her care, servitude, and endless explanations were canceled out by her wild eyes that dared not meet my own and by her demand: "I tell you to tell him!"

Papa picked up his cane, then setting it between his legs, said to me quietly: "After you were made right, you would have pains of long-dormant organs coming alive in your body and starting to grow—duplicate organs that had to be removed."

I was no longer doubtful of their story—which, at first, had seemed an invention, an excuse. What Papa said struck a knowledge that all through my childhood had been unacceptable and thereby ignored. Had I heard nurses whisper while I slept or a surgeon explain what he did while I lay etherized under his fingers? Or was I born with the knowledge which Papa's words prodded to recognition? "In conception, I was twins. Is that how it was?"

Papa nodded. "You were difficult," he said. My sister, cut from me part by part as she sought an identity, was only a passing sickness to him. who would ever keep me happy and well. What gluttonous thing had I

done in the warmth and the silence of the womb? Papa's assurance was forced: "But things were never so bad as we thought they might be when we first lifted the robe from around you. Even then, one of us said—" He looked at Mama. "Was it you, or was it me?" But Mama hadn't attended. She sat stiff in the rocker—her hands clutched in her lap, her face still set in the demand *I tell you to tell him!* Papa looked away, caressing the cane in his hand. Then he looked at my knees bent high above the stool that I sat on. "It's no matter who loved you first or first put words to our decision. Our minds were the same. One of us said, 'This is ours. He's been given to us.' Lying there on the kitchen table between us, you lifted a hand—. Didn't he, Vi?"

But Mama was obstinate of memory. In her body she had the modicum of blood that made her a Negro; and though she was respected for that limitation far more than despised, she was ever bitter that it was acknowledged at all. It was easy for any woman to admire her grace and her beauty or for any man to praise her cunning when, above admiration or praise, there hung the exclusion: *She's a Negro*. It was an exclusion that never had to be uttered; for a lifting hand, a sigh, a faraway look, or any such posturing was damnation enough among those who knew her heritage.

Mamma was wealthy, articulate, and in every way grand; yet she had never been able to wink at the exclusion which, at the snap of a finger, at a curled lip or a snicker, made any lout her superior simply because his skin, even though it be filthy and far darker than hers, had the authority of *white*.

It is no wonder that at Papa's question she sat like stone. Downtown, she might turn from any stranger or the tiresome recognition *Viola Le-moine?* before the embarrassed eyes could turn away in denial. But here, in her parlor, there was no turning—no traffic to be lost in or shadows of buildings. This was her sanctuary, her escape, security, and solace—her fortress, her prison. Only I might renounce her here—being white at last and long familiar with the room, all its birthdays and memories, its confidences, love, accumulations, its ever-changing draperies, and its never-changing identity. I was as much a part of the room as its molding; for I had been her son.

Forced to action, what else could she have done but drop her hand towards the embroidery as a promise, a plea? Giving me my freedom, she had surrendered her right to command. Of a sudden, she was the nigger caught in a disallowed act—eyes full of terror and any excuse, heresy. But, at some moment past, hadn't she whispered, "For all our prayers we were never blessed with a child of our own bodies"? She clutched her teeth tight against any errant word as she rocked to and fro. And, suddenly, Papa threw his cane to the floor.

What could there have been among us, except silence. Oh, the frogs in the hollow were bellowing, crickets cried in the yard, some fool's klaxon screamed past *Are you all niggers asleep, or making little pickaninnies to*



*run around town?* Perhaps a boat sounded on the river. But in the parlor, all was silent, except for the creak of the rocker. The embroidery lay crumpled on the rug and against the treadle of the organ. The cane lay beside it, makeshift and inane without Papa's hand to give it identity—a crooked piece of smilax vine that, before my time, had been cut from the liana of some swamp.

I knew that Papa was waiting for some gesture or word that would make us a family again. But also I knew (and surely Mama knew) that nothing would ever break this new silence among us. Decision was already made and, though it was mine, the how and the why of it I am uncertain of still. Hadn't their confession, making me white, at once made me a monster? Having been abandoned by those who conceived me in some sawdust passion, was I compelled—in a perverse revenge—to abandon those who were vulnerable and at hand? Or, after all the charity, pity, condescension, and insolence one endures as a Negro in this time and this place, was I flattered to be white?—on the free side of a barrier and suddenly aware of the power to pity, to allow, and yet to turn away: *I am not of your passions—or your blood!*

I rose from the stool. My legs seemed inordinately long. I thought that I might touch the chandelier if I lifted my hands. I stepped over the embroidery and the cane. I felt the sweat in my armpits and in the crotch of my legs; it had sprung more from nervousness than from the heat of the night.

Look back? Oh, never! Not to Papa's supplication or Mama's surrender.

As I stepped from the room I pulled the door shut, which in all my memory had never been shut. It seemed the closing of a vault. . . . But on which side were the dead?

The hall was dark. Turning, I saw the moonlight in the panes of the front door. New-born and six-foot-two, clad in fine summer trousers and a speckled shirt, I would seek the world and its acceptance as eagerly as any blind whelp, after the first breath, seeks the teat confidently.

The house was dark and still. Then, I was on the gallery—the heavy door of crystal, mahogany, and bronze closed behind me. Moonlight lay on the steps, on the walk bordered with green bottles, on the slate stairs to the banquette. The night was wild with sounds—crickets, frogs, idling boats, and the clock from St. Joseph's telling the hour.

The world was miraculously new. Yet, in its sweetness, there was a lacing of rue and, in its ecstasy, a tenure of death.

Even bondage dies, no matter what name it found its strength in: hatred, fear, custom, or love. As surely as all the creatures of the world are to die, any loyalty must die. Creation itself fades and dies in its very progression. Only memory survives—as one at a grave crying *Why?* under the tall tree mute of recollection and unaware of its acorns falling to the headstones and the grass.

# A Pirated Edition

• Anne Ridler

Acquaintances

May meet and pass with a brief Good-day,  
Yet each takes with him as he walks away  
The other's image, lasting on like echoes,  
Lingering like the print upon the retina  
Of colour and shadow after the eyes close.

Phantoms criss-cross

Are sent from brain to brain, and none  
Can call his straying image back again.  
What part of me do you carry with you, friend?  
Scraps of my speech, flashes of face and form  
Unknown to me, that frolic through your mind.

And none can guess

How queerly he haunts another's dream,  
How comic or how monstrous he may seem:  
Royal personage prancing in cowboy dress  
Or unjust judge—a pirated edition  
Of his true self, and there is no redress.

# Afternoon of an Academic

• L. H. Butrick

She sits there, four feet away  
Face flushed, bubbling ideas  
Out of that rounded well  
Or fountain . . . or fountains

Not that precision counts  
Any more than age, maybe?  
Gone.

And curled on the chair where she sat

A long gold hair  
Brushed carelessly from her cap  
One, precisely  
Held up in the sunlight  
Floats, light as air, glittering  
And is draped over  
The drab jacket's shoulder  
Then home with a lighter step.



# The Cocoon

• Inge Trachtenberg

It was really only when the children were older that Susan began to have a little more time for herself. Ben was very busy with the rising demands of the business—A. Nathanson and Sons, Inc.—as well as with numerous charitable endeavors. He spent more and more time with his brother Max, and both of them “practically lived at the Synagogue,” as Susan and her sister-in-law Lois claimed. They were quite a clan, the Nathansons; the boys’ father, old Av, still dictated their image collectively both in the fur trade and at Shul, and they had seven children among themselves.

Susan, while somewhat dwarfed next to the exuberant and bulky Lois, was a pretty woman. Her endless loose-fitting skirts didn’t completely obscure a slim shape, though her poor posture almost did. She had a fineboned, small face, large luminous gray eyes and soft, fly-away dark hair. The business-like round watch with the brown leather strap which she wore, pointed by contrast to the pretty fragility of her wrist. She returned with pleasure, now that she had the time, to the voracious reading of her girlhood, and she revived her interest in modern art. At night she tried never to miss the 10 o’clock news on Channel 5, and during the day she always had her radio tuned in on WQXR. Suddenly it seemed to her that she was becoming aware of the larger world she had ignored, or been insulated from, all these years. The strange thing was that angry and problematic as that world appeared, it did not frighten and dismay her as it had done when she had been a girl. Instead, it fascinated her, it involved her. When the nominating committee from Sisterhood offered her the Presidency, it almost seemed irrelevant to take on this chore.

She tried to discuss it with Ben; in fact, she tried to talk about current issues and problems with Ben, but he was always on the run these days. Except on Shabbat, of course. But on Shabbat Ben liked, after Synagogue and dinner which was devoted to a discussion on the week’s Parsha, to take a nap. And it was winter, the days were short and Minchah was early, so it would soon be time for him to return to Shul for the Rabbi’s Shiurim between Minchah and Mariv. Later in the evening Max and Lois came over; they always did, to say GUT VOCH.

“Nu, what are you doing these days?” Max asked Susan. “How does it feel to be Madam President?”

"Susan hasn't decided yet whether she'll take the job," Ben answered for her. "She thinks she might go to Washington instead, to march in the peace parade."

Lois shouted her big laugh.

"Really," Ben continued, "she's all fired up about it." He turned to Susan and smiled at her lovingly, "Aren't you, Katzele?"

Susan continued to assemble the tea things.

"Mishuggah! Let the Goyim worry about marching in parades," Max said comfortably.

"Are you serious?" Susan's cheeks had reddened.

Lois laughed again, then she patted Susan's hand . . . "He is and he is not," she said.

"And what does that mean?" Susan asked. She was pouring the tea now. The tall glasses rattled in their silver holders. She put the jam and the lump sugar down with exaggerated care.

Max shrugged. He let Lois answer for him again . . .

"It means: Of course he is concerned; we all are. This is a terrible war; all wars are. And all the boys are getting to be that age, I mean, all the boys in the family, our boys . . ." She broke off to take a lump of sugar between her teeth, to sip some tea past it. That's the way she liked it; Max and Ben were spooning strawberry jam into theirs, Russian style. "But, anyhow," Lois resumed . . .

"Anyhow," Max interrupted, "Anyhow, it's in G'd's hand, blessed be his name."

"That's simplistic!" Susan flared.

"Susan!" Ben cried.

She sprang up and rushed from the room.

All the next week she felt contrite. Also mousy, depressed and unattractive. Her very hair, wispy and thin, was insignificant. And her clothes! She looked down on her longish, baggy skirt, thought grimly of the fashion pictures that she had seen last Sunday. She would be just in style if the new length took; she had simply skipped the age of the mini. Of course, she wouldn't have gone to extremes, still . . . Nine year old Leah, the second to her youngest, said . . . "Your posture is terrible, mother." The child was imitating her teacher's voice yet, this, too, depressed Susan this week. She decided to skip the Sisterhood meeting on Monday night.

The following Shabbat the Rabbi spoke of Judaism's attitude toward charity. The point, it soon became clear, was an elaboration on CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME. However, he prefaced his remarks by reading excerpts from a publication that reported on the Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. the Reform Movement. A Manifesto had been drawn up at this convention, the Rabbi pronounced, that called on Jews to stop contributing to UJA and to stop buying Israel bonds; to

give these moneys to the Blacks instead. It was contrasting this view of the Reformed that the Rabbi build his case, the case of what the Torah really demanded of the Jew.

On the way home Susan said to Ben . . . "I don't believe it!"

"What don't you believe?"

"That such a manifesto was approved at the Reform Convention."

"They are capable of anything!" Sixteen year old David mixed in.

"You see," Susan flared, "David is already full of prejudice! What do you mean **THEY ARE CAPABLE OF ANYTHING?** Whom are you talking of? Your enemies? The Arabs?"

"Oh mother, don't get so excited."

"You're talking about Jews who simply worship differently than we do. Differently, not worse!"

"That's not true. They are barely Jews."

"Ben. Will you speak to the child?"

Ben was walking with his hands folded behind his back. He spoke mildly . . . "You can't make a statement like this, Susan. You can't just say that you don't believe it. Afterall, the Rabbi wouldn't lie."

"Not lie, maybe, but he distorts. Anything, to make Orthodoxy shine."

"That's an awful thing to say," David shouted.

"Don't yell at your mother," Ben said to the boy.

They walked home without further conversation.

Susan found the Jewish Telegraphic Bulletin before they sat down to dinner. Though she didn't show it to Ben until later when they were alone. The remark the Rabbi had attributed to the Manifesto had been an opinion voiced from the floor of the convention.

"If the Reform Rabbi would preach a sermon about every foolish statement that someone makes during our obardmeetings, he could give unending amusement to his congregation," Susan said. Her voice trembled.

"All right, so what do you want? Shall we have the Rabbi censored?"

"I just want to know why we have to have prejudice preached from the pulpit . . . the Rabbi's sermon was interesting and strong without that introduction. Why must we always tear someone else down?"

"And why have you become so hostile?"

"Me? Hostile?"

"About everything Orthodox."

"Me?"

"It's simplistic, it's distorted, it's dishonest, it's prejudiced, there are too many fences, it doesn't make sense!"

"Who says that?"

"You do. At every opportunity. You'll undermine the children's faith yet."

"How can you say that, Ben?"

"Just listen to yourself sometime."

Susan started to cry.

They did not speak of it again. Unaccustomed to quarreling, they both made every effort to be gentle with each other. But Susan thought about it a lot. What was the matter with her? She had been so happy to marry into the security of Ben's Orthodox family. And just as she had expected, she had gained peace; it was marvelous to give up choices, to walk serenely in proscribed ways.

The nominating committee called Susan for her answer. But she stalled; really, she hadn't made up her mind yet.

"Why is God so conceited?" Sarale, the youngest of Susan's children asked one day.

"What do you mean, God is conceited?"

"He always says FOR I AM A MIGHTY GOD; that's boasting, isn't it?"

Susan bit her lip. "Ask Daddy," she finally said to the child. It was a hard question, she thought.

David, who had overheard the exchange, challenged her . . .

"Why didn't you explain?"

"Daddy will do it better."

"You didn't trust yourself, mother," the boy attacked. His blue eyes were flashing. "You were afraid that you would have to say something rationalistic, you always have to reach, to make a conscious effort. Faith is just a premise to you."

"You are getting to be pretty sharp with all your Talmudic reasoning, aren't you?" Susan tried to smile.

"That's it though, isn't it, mother?"

Suddenly she was tired of hedging . . . "I don't know," she said, "I don't know what I believe. I try not to think about it."

"Well, you ought to, mother, you really should." David adjusted the little jarmulka that Leah had crocheted for him. When he shook his head in this earnest way, his silky hair flew around his face.

Susan's chest felt tight; such a beautiful boy, so bright . . .

It was Shabbat again. As was her custom, Susan, after blessing and lighting the candles, stood gazing at them, thinking about the week behind her. David's words had haunted her these last days. Yes, she ought to think about what she really believed. But she didn't dare. It suddenly seemed to her that the whole structure she had built, the whole theory of peace in this ordered way of life, would totter if she did. And she could not bear that; her investment was too heavy. She looked down at the embroidered cloth under which the holiday loaves rested: Ben's mother had done the crewel work. No, the fault lay in her, in her imperfect understanding . . .

Upstairs, the water was running. Ben and the children were getting ready for the best meal of the week. There would be prayers and gefillte

fish and chicken soup with Kreplach and roastbeef and noodle pudding. Later, they would sing. She smoothed back her hair, readied her smile.

"Good Shabbos!" she called brightly when they came downstairs.

On Monday night she went to the Sisterhood meeting. She agreed to take on the Presidency. She also signed up for a second weekly seminar at the Adult Education, Extension Division, Yeshiva High School. Of course, that left her very little time for outside reading. C. L. Sulzberger's *A LONG ROW OF CANDLES* and Solzhenitsyn's *FIRST CIRCLE* became due at the library. She returned them unread.

## Young Couple

• Kenneth Johnson

Today, despite my errand, I stopped to watch  
a boy and girl, barely teenagers, play  
a game of tennis; watched their bodies racing  
back and forth across the court's hard clay,  
their faces reddening in the sun—but reddened  
even more by a warmth no day's sun brings.  
And, watching, felt a sudden wish billow  
my breath, as winds billow a gull's stretched wings.

It was no wish to be teen-young again;  
I have, since then, lived days I would not care  
to lose merely to strive for them again.  
Nor a wish to live their kind of love affair;  
for I know, tonight, afraid to risk a show  
of love, or else struck shy, they will relapse  
into lame jokes, loud boasts, rib-pokes—and feel  
the spiraled stairs they climbed today collapse.

Instead, stirred by the fur-soft flames of joy  
that, more than sunlight, warmed those two because—  
granted each other's longed-for love—they knew  
this day must be a miracle: it was  
a wish my present life were not so quick  
to compromise, so meekly sensible  
that I no longer sought what would lead me  
to feel my day—my life—a miracle.



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# My Ingrid Says

• Joseph Meredith

"Your face," she said, "is like a home,  
Warm and laughing, when you smile."  
Of course, I smile; bid her welcome.

"Come, sit by the fire, little one, while  
I brew the tea. Cream? Lemon?  
You have a healthy look. Yes, a healthy smile."

My Ingrid says I have the smell of woods upon me;  
the damp of late December afternoons.  
(My life has put the smell of dust upon me;  
the dust of books and poorly ventilated rooms.)

"I could, perhaps, grow to love you,  
in time not now. A month; a year."  
I pour some cream in lemoned tea, watch it curd and stew.

"Please, understand, I have this fear.  
You see, you need nothing I could give you."  
You could raise a window; forestall this tear.

My Ingrid says I have the look of life about me;  
a lover's look when rising late.  
(My mirror says I have the look of death about me;  
a loser's look when courting fate.)

# Guitarra

• V. A. Sarino

They built a country of olive trees  
between the sides of a wooden song  
curved, smooth, deep as the flatness of Avila  
it cries the centuries along.

Sitting in the corner, a boy plays with his life  
in sounds of burnt sand and quiet streets  
on a Sunday when the dead lie with their ears  
to the lids of their coffins listening for the sun.

A town, more a church, built on a hill, sits,  
with its alleys leading up, up to a plaza  
where the years whisper like shivering old women  
while the sky rains needles on the bleeding ground.



## Contributors

**T**HOMAS SNAPP'S portfolio of poems initiates what we hope will become a recurring feature called Poet's Portfolio. Our plan is to offer a representative sampling of the work of a talented and original poet, along with a few words of introduction and appreciation by the editors. (Associate Editor J. D. McClatchy did the honors this time.) We are happy to begin the series with Mr. Snapp's sensitive verse. Two more of his poems will appear in *The New Yorker* later this year. We welcome HARRIS DOWNEY to our pages for the second time. "The Habits of Home" appeared in the November issue of this volume. Mr. Downey's work has often won awards in past years and has been frequently anthologized. He is the author of three novels. ANNE RIDLER, the distinguished English editor, critic, biographer and playwright, has published six volumes of verse. Her seventh, *Sometime After*, will be issued by Faber & Faber this fall. Formerly secretary to T. S. Eliot, she is married to Vivian Ridler, printer to Oxford University. L. H. BUTRICK, who lives and teaches in Oxford, Ohio, appears here for the first time. INGE TRACHTENBERG is an industrious free-lance writer from Englewood, N. J., whose earlier story, "On a Dark Tuesday," appeared in our March issue last year. KENNETH JOHNSON teaches in the English Department at Suffolk University in Massachusetts. JOSEPH MEREDITH made his debut in our November issue. V. A. SARINO is a graduate student at the University of Maryland. The mammoth effort of compiling the index for the past 20 years was carried out by La Salle College reference librarians Karen Avenick, Georgette Most, and Louise Rappaport. To them the endless thanks of the present editors and all future readers who are concerned with the past.

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